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A Case Study of Louisville's Racial Justice History from 1968 to 1974

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Introduction

This research aims to unpack the final years and ultimate split of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). Despite its influence and connection with other well-known civil rights organizations, SCEF is still relatively obscure. During the 1950s, SCEF operated as a Southern civil rights organization that focused on organizing whites in the struggle against racism, oppression, and exploitation. They aimed to bring poor and working-class whites into coalitions with the black liberation movement.

In the first years of the 1970s, conflicts between members of SCEF and Louisville's Black Panther Party led to an organizational split that included the resignation of long-time SCEF directors, Anne and Carl Braden, in 1974.



Top: Andrew Bates, Bob Zellner, Helen Greever. Middle: Carl Braden. Bottom: Bill Allison, Virginia Collins, Anne Braden.



SCEF
SPEAKERS



Methods

The majority of primary sources came from SCEF documents and interviews that were published in the early 1970s. The documents included letters, memos, meeting notes, or reports published by the SCEF Interim Committee.

In order to supplement the primary sources and gain context about the civil rights movement in Louisville during the late 1960s and early 1970s, I conducted interviews and referenced already existing oral history interviews with SCEF staff.

Findings

During the 1972 Louisville Seven trial, SCEF began organizing with Black Panther Party members. During this time, small arguments arose between organizations over the usage of the SCEF office and equipment. At the same time, members of SCEF began to suspect that a member of the Panthers was a police agent infiltrating the two organizations. While this member was eventually exonerated by SCEF attorney Bill Allison, SCEF staff still suspected the Panthers of being infiltrated by secret agents.

In 1973, a series of robberies and a kidnapping led to the deterioration of the relationship between SCEF and the Black Panther Party, as well as to the eventual dissolution of SCEF as an organization.

Findings (cont.)

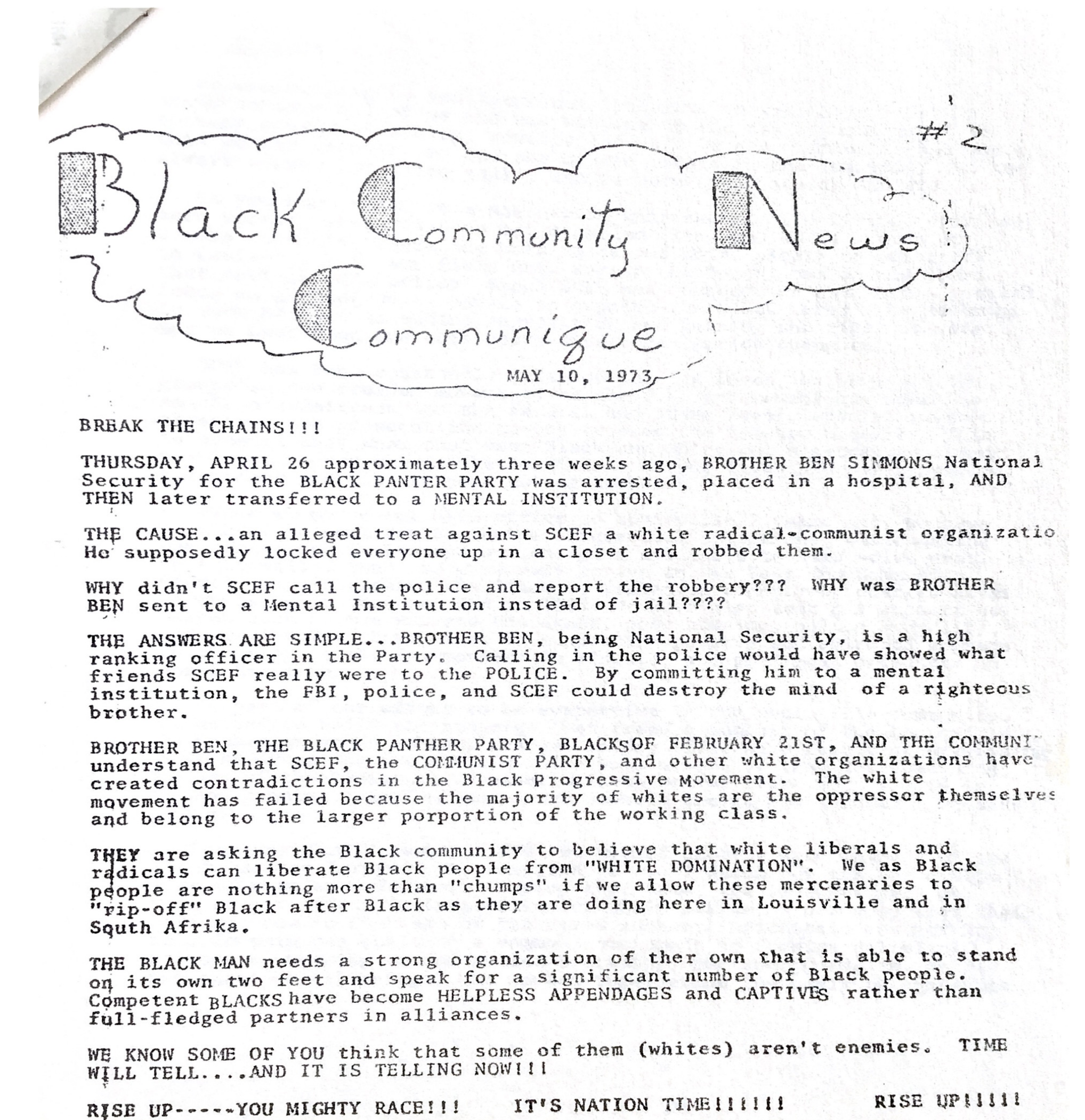
In the spring of 1973, Ben Simmons, a member of the Black Panther Party, robbed Mike Welch, the administrative assistant of SCEF. This was followed by an armed robbery committed at the SCEF office by members of the Black Panther Party.

In response to the robberies, members of SCEF requested a warrant that would lead to the incarceration of Simmons in a mental institution. The decision to incarcerate Simmons would lead to both the kidnapping of Helen Greever, SCEF's executive director, and to the eventual resignation or firing of many SCEF staff members and leaders.

Following a SCEF board meeting in October 1973, Helen Greever resigned as executive director and members Jan Phillips and Judi Simmons were fired as a result of their choice to request a mental inquest warrant.

Anne and Carl Braden both resigned in 1974, with Anne stating that the actions of SCEF in 1973 "violated the deepest principles for which SCEF stood."

Walter Collins, the head of the Special Interim Committee, took on the role of the executive director after Greever resigned.



Conclusion

An examination of SCEF's final years shines a light on the realities of interracial organizing during the 1970s. In contrast to the idealistic imagery of the early civil rights movement, SCEF's split highlights the increasing difficulties of coalition-building between black and white organizers during the early 1970s. However, the presence of an organization like SCEF in Louisville suggests that civil rights organizing in the South endured throughout the tumultuous and pivotal period of the mid-to-late 1960s, and that antiracist work continued throughout a transitional political climate.

Selected Sources

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